

*WRITING OURSELVES WHOLE: Using the Power of Your Own Creativity to Recover and Heal From Sexual Trauma*, by Jennifer Cross (Mango Publishing Group, 2017)

FOREWORD by Pat Schneider

*Writing Ourselves Whole* is the most essential book on writing practice I know. It goes at great depth and length into territory that other books, including my own, have treated as important but not as fully developed methodologies. Those of us who have written about writing, and have included writing as a healing practice, have been waiting for this book. Jen Cross is the perfect author to have created it. Although the central focus here grows out of her own profound experience of sexual abuse, there is little in her content that does not apply to other kinds of trauma. She expands upon the definition of trauma in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* ("exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury or sexual violence.") She writes: "Trauma is a site of shock in the body and/or psyche. It's a rupture, a bifurcation, a disassembly. Trauma marks the moment when what was ended, and something new emerged." Then she asks, "But what was the moment of trauma?"

This book is about the search for and the uncovering of, that moment: its actuality; its lingering images; its effects in the life of the person who experienced it; and a proven healing methodology: writing. Every writing teacher, writing coach, writing workshop or group leader -- and every person with a history of any kind of trauma needs this book. The teachers and guides need it because in every group, class or workshop they lead there will be trauma survivors. Survivors need it because it is a methodology that can be used, as Cross makes clear, alone or in tandem with therapy, counseling, and/or medical interventions.

She suggests that almost everyone has suffered some trauma. *We may take trauma into our bodies and lives through our parents' physical violence, or sexual misuse or molestation, through their name calling or threats or mind games or psychological torture. It may be an assault by a stranger, someone who took us by surprise on the street or in our home. It may be a natural disaster, like living through an earthquake or hurricane. It may be a physical illness, like cancer. It may be living under racism, and/or other forms of oppression. It may be living or fighting in a warzone. It may be the legacy of our parents' or grandparents' traumas, or ancestors' experiences of political, cultural, or intimate violences.*

I have had in my workshops, and now in my deeply personal friendship, a man who was a survivor of trauma during his youthful years as a medic in the Vietnam war. Our first contact was when he called me to ask if he could join my writing workshop. The leader of the workshop he had been attending asked him not to come any more, because the other members of the workshop "could not take" what he was writing about.

That silencing, and that silence, is at the heart of Jen Cross' book. She brilliantly and explicitly makes clear the mechanisms of silencing at work in sexual predation, as the predator threatens his or her prey in order to protect the predator. But she never forgets the silencing that goes on in relation to other kinds of trauma – the reluctance to *hear* the almost unbearable truths of human cruelty, human suffering. Yet deeper even than that silencing is the silence of the self, the inability to remember, the unwillingness to revisit old trauma, the fear of what might happen to self or to others if voice was given to old wounds, old pain. Writing alone and/or in a supportive group of peers, Cross makes clear, can be a safe way to open images that had been locked in inner and/or outer silence.

She gives careful attention to the fears of writing that plague most people who try to put pencil to paper, fears that inhibit and often fully prevent artistic creation. In her sections of journal for her own healing, and in her suggestions, prompts, and helps for her readers, she stresses the crucial importance of what Peter Elbow termed “free writing.” *To write is to enter the mess, is to spill out all your syllables, is to devil the precious eggs everyone else treads so carefully upon. Writing opens the wound, lets in oxygen and releases pus, helps me breathe again, I mean, breathe with gills & webbed toes, breathe against the tide that's coming in, breathe through the mountains of fear I live within. . . . This is what writing does. It marks up what we work so hard to make smooth, it pulls tight all the lines cast forth within us, knots together past present future, opens space and time to release the brilliant catastrophe we were meant to be. . . . writing sets all that possibility free, helps it step ginger or fierce into the world, to discover ourselves again.*

*Writing Ourselves Whole* is a book of many treasures: that lyrical beauty of language; a practical, measured trove of specific helps both for an individual seeker and for a person wanting to create a supportive group for trauma survivors like the ones Cross so clearly describes; and somewhat unexpectedly, pages of what Cross calls “delicious body stories” – accounts of workshops dedicated to erotic writing. Through all of this quietly, rather subtly, Cross' own story emerges from the beginnings of the abuse she suffered until the dramatic end of it and through her own recovery of self through her writing practice. Sprinkled throughout and condensed near the book's end are writing prompts and suggestions for confronting, understanding, and surviving the various stages of recovery.

I deliberately stress the word “survive” in relation to the stages of recovery. For me, personally, the greatest “Ah-HA!” of the book came in the section where Cross, walking on a beach alone at night, deals with the possibility that she, herself, is *not broken*, as she has defined herself throughout her healing practice. “*Not broken or unbroken: rather, intact and imperfect. Wounded, sore, struggling, scared, funny, hopeful.*” There, at that point in the reading of her book manuscript, I felt myself thinking, *I need to write. I need to write how it might feel if I imagine myself not broken where I was hurt, where I have no memory, but lingering effect of something bad happening. I need to write.* I would be surprised to learn that anyone could

read though this book and not be stopped, surprised, and finding him or herself thinking: *I need to write.*

Nowhere does Cross imply or state that recovery through writing will be easy. But the essential initial act of courage, she makes very clear, is to break silence. And the first effective step toward recovery may in fact be breaking one's own inner silence, privately by writing, or openly by writing and reading aloud in a supportive group.

No writer before Jen Cross, I believe, has made that fact so irrefutably clear. And no writer before her has translated their own deep experience of trauma and recovery more passionately, more beautifully, more richly with quotations from other writers, medical professionals, philosophers, and poets.

*Writing Ourselves Whole* is cause for celebration. Its time has come. It will be an invaluable training and tool for both professionals dealing with trauma survivors, and for survivors looking for a private and/or beginning open revelation of their own stories.